CHAPTER-VI

CONCLUSION

M. Rama Rao observes the role of the short story in modern Indian literature and says:

"We have had in India stories which lie embedded in the hymns of the *Rigveda*, or scattered in the *Upanishads* and the epics, the stories which constitute the *Panchatantra*, the *Hitopadesha*, the *Sukasaptati*, the *Dashakumarcharita* and the *Vetalpachvimsati* in Sanskrit, the Buddhist *Jataka Kattha* in Pali and a host of similar stories in modern Indian languages." ¹

In such ancient times lie the roots of Indian short stories. The stories focus not only the rich heritage of Indian life but also the social and religious realities of Indian life. Usha Bande and Atma Ram write:

"Nothing escapes the notice of the storyteller; political behaviour, the joint family system, the generation gap, the changing attitude towards love, marriage and sex,
the invasion by feminist ideology have all been subjected to incisive analysis.”

Qualitatively, if not quantitatively, the Indian women short story writers stand out as unique, impressive, inspiring and definitely endowed with remarkable competence in the handling of the genre, the short story. In the last two decades, more women writers have turned to the short story to express themselves to write about women and bring women into writing. So they have put themselves into this 'short text', which suits the stream of female consciousness. Quantitatively there is no comparison with men short story writers, maybe because the Indian English short story by women has emerged only recently.

A retrospect of the Indian women writers' short story in English would be in order to remind us of the beginning and the development of the form. The scene of contemporary Indian socio-cultural life is portrayed by women writers for the first time in the form of short story. Krupabai Sathianathan, Cornelia Sorabji, Rajalaxmi Debi, Mrs. Ghosal, Santa and Sita Chatterjee were the fore-runners. Modern women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Dina Mehta, Sunita Jain, Attia Hussain, Sadiqa...
Peerbhoy, Sujata Balasubramanian and others developed the form up to the present watermark. The variety of themes, language and techniques used by them exhibit versatility of a remarkable kind. They deserve not only appreciation but the admiration and gratitude of their female readers because they focus mainly on the life of woman.

Rose Ernestine had said as far back as the beginning years of Feminism:

"Humanity recognizes no sex; mind recognizes no sex; life and death, pleasure and pain, happiness and misery recognize no sex. Like man, woman comes involuntarily into existence; like him, she possesses physical and mental and moral powers.....like him she has to pay the penalty for disobeying nature's laws, and far greater penalties she has to suffer from ignorance... like man she also enjoys or suffers with her country. Yet she is not recognized as his equal."³

Indian women short story writers believe in a harmonious relationship between man and woman which would lead to the progress of both, indeed to the progress of mankind and raising humanity as well.
As A.K. Ramanujan puts it:

"Suppose you cut a tall bamboo in two
make the bottom piece a woman,
the headpiece a man;
rub them together
till they kindle,
tell me now,
the fire that is born,
is it male or female,

O Ramanatha?" 4 (Translation of a 12th c. saint's vacana.)

The entire present dissertation is confined to examining the achievement of these six important Indian women short story writers in English – Shashi Deshpande, Dina Mehta, Anjana Appachana, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakarni and Jhumpa Lahiri. They have been chosen for their feminist angle, for focusing on the woman's point of view in their stories. The protagonists' plight, their untold miseries, emotions, dilemma, conflict, alienation at home and society, discrimination - all come in for exploration, for poignant analysis. They paint a heart-rending picture of the
condition, status, loss of identity and life-opportunities suffered by woman under patriarchy. Their women again, are wives, unmarried maidens, single divorcees, mothers, grandmothers, widows... The other issues dealt with by them are man-woman relationship, cross-cultural crisis in the lives of immigrants, comparison between the Indian and foreign environment or cultural norms, and the clash ensuing therefrom, and so on and so forth.

These short story writers are keen observers of the plight of women. They do not just comment on, but write the stuff of their life into the stories of those women with great feeling, sensitivity and imagination. And the readers, especially women readers i.e. housewives, mothers, daughters etc, feel as if they are reading about themselves, their own lives and their own experiences, Kamal Mehta observes that Shashi Deshpande

"... deals with the housewife and her problems like marital discord, separation, and depression in love, boredom and lack of understanding in the marital life among others." 5

The short stories of the above said writers have been embellished with local colour. Their short stories depict
Indian life and sensibility, they use Indian names for their protagonists. The names of Indian dishes, customs, society and names of cities lace the narrative and make the readers feel familiar.

Shashi Deshpande has not portrayed the actual of the women. She is more concerned with their psychological trauma, mainly the plight of middleclass people; there are no references to the poorer class of people. Her narrative technique is simple, but moves with great gusto. Unlike Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, she has not drawn a comprehensive and humanistic picture in a humorous and comical spirit. She is rather interested in depicting the feminine psyche and the feminine sensibility.

Shashi Deshpande's stories heighten an in-depth study of the agonies and aspirations, bewilderment and hopes of her female protagonists.

D. R. Sharma observes;

"Far superior in encapsulating the stuff of life and employing the tools of short fiction, Deshpande prefers to deal with the inner life of the individual rather than his outer performance."
The influence of western writers like Somerset Maugham, O. Henry, Doris Lessing, Jane Austen can be located in her writing.

Another writer, Anjana Appachana succeeds in conveying effectively her idea of the modern woman and her plight through her stories in her collection. Dina Mehta, with her two collections of short stories explores feminine sensibility from a different angle. Jealousy is the primary emotion in her story, *Absolution*. Shiv K. Kumar observes;

“Our women writers seem to have lent a new dimension of sensitivity and perception to the short story in English. They find its limited canvas quite congenial to their sensibilities in confronting their brief, often muted, experiences. They prefer to say a thing or two, and then let the rest fade away into silence. There's, for instance, Dina Mehta, whose story ‘Absolution’ eddies around a fragile, almost veiled, emotion of jealousy.”

The writers of the Indian diaspora have chosen to let the inner voices of their protagonists speak, the muted cries of the women immigrants who are caught between the culture of their home and the culture of the host country. They neither leave the former nor adopt the other. Their home and its
etiquettes haunt the immigrants all the time. Raja Rao remarks “I carry India with me wherever I go.” Katherine Mansfield also feels similarly; “Wherever I live I write with New Zealand in my bones”. Intense nostalgia is an unavoidable feeling for all the immigrants and that is what unmistakably we feel as the undertone in all the women short story writers of the Indian diaspora.

In my thesis I focused on certain points revealed by the Indian women short story writers in English. Their short stories study woman’s sensibility, Personality, Leadership quality, Self – independence, Self – esteem, Family, Capability for Self-development, Competence etc. It reveals how today’s woman has been able to shake off the image imposed on them by the Vedas, and tradition and patriarchy. The point I wish to make is that despite the remarkable variety in themes, it is still possible to locate areas of common concern amongst the Indian women short story writers.

Technically, Mukherjee's language is lucid, flexible, and effective. She has utilized the English language as a medium of expression to bring the world of Indian women and the Indian feminine sensibility to life. For example, in her A wife's story Mukherjee uses the Mangalsutra for the
marriage necklace, which the wife *Panna Bhatt* wears before going to meet her husband after many days. Words, like the Bengali Brahmin *Sahab* the expressions *baapre baap*! dishes like *dal* and vegetable *pakoras* remind the readers about Indian culture and create an Indian ambience. She has used Indian names like *Vinitha, Panna Bhatt, Kusum, Jasmine, Patel, Maya, Sailen, Rajiv* and many. The reader sees the presence of India thick and palpable, in her stories.

The women short story writers are eager to reveal the truth that in most cases patriarchy stands silent, motionless, unconcerned, detached and dull towards the lacerated feminine sensibility. And dullness in them is an unforgivable crime.

The present thesis underscores a more or less similar sensibility on the part of woman in the past, in the present as also woman within India, woman outside India. Wherever she lives in the world, whatever language she speaks, whatever culture she belongs to, her sensibility is one and woman has lost her selfhood somewhere in the same household duties, in the monotonous, silent environment of home, in fulfilling the demands of other members of the family. The word 'housewife' indicates the emptiness of her life.
Women writers have chosen the short story form for self expression, because they feel that the form expresses their sensibility appropriately. The emergence into freedom from that binding suffocating environment leads them to choose the form which is not rigid, structure-oriented, comparatively speaking. They are attracted by the flexible nature of the form where they can experiment with various images of woman.

These women writers are chiefly interested in the emotional world of women, and their short stories are voices of the feminine sensibility as well as of psychology. Their contribution lies in recording wonderfully, with great sensibility and in depth, the untold miseries, and agonies of the protagonists, their frustrations, their peripheral existence, and their reaching out for more meaningful existence.

Discrimination is the mother of loss of identity. The short stories reveal the protagonists' search for a new identity, and it seems as if their search is a never ending one.

"Do I have an identity of my own?"

"Will I shackle myself?"

"This face, this body.....is that all I mean when I say 'I'?"
“Am I an outsider in my own home? Have they locked me out or have I locked myself in?” Such questions haunt the female protagonists of their stories.

A man reads short stories which are centered around a woman as mere stories. A woman reads those stories with feeling, as if they mirror a part of her own life.

The work of these six Indian Women short story writers in English, put together, forms a considerable body of creative writing, remarkable for its competence in language-use and narration, as also its deep perception of the sensibility involved and the issues. There is never a dull moment in reading the stories, and there is so much variety that one is tempted to exclaim ‘Here’s God’s plenty indeed!’ of course, there are semblances and affinities between the characters and events in the short stories of one writer and those of another. But there is a well-defined ideological stance from which the story-material is viewed and treated. A writer like Shashi Deshpande may strike us as more of a traditionalist than of a radical feminist, who seeks redressed of the problems of man-woman relationship within the bounds of familial harmony, rather than in the uncompromising way of Ibsen’s Nora.
Bharati Mukherjee stands at the other extreme. The protagonists give the marginalisation of the immigrant and her ‘outsider’ complex a ‘U’ turn. It is not just a facile solution suggested but the only ‘way out’ for the trapped Asian woman immigrant.

Linguistically, too these Indian women writers of short stories in English seem to be more than a match for the men writers. What with their use of *baap-re-baap* and so on.

An Indian reader could be proud of a slew of women creative writers cropping up on the Indian literary scene and finding this particular suitable to their purpose and answering to their creative reach.

Research is an endless task in view of the complex depths in the nature of life and experience. Since life involves a network of relations with other factors we may be compelled to probe into the sisterly and neighboring fields.

Women have rarely been presented as women, realistically, by men in all the literatures of the world. Either she is self-abnegating, self-sacrificing angel or a witch or villain or predator. They are not treated as the equals of men and as such given positive roles. Woman does not figure as a person in her own right, but an entity that belongs to man.
Feminine Literary criticism proposed to do away with this lop-sided picture and judge literary expressions by both men and women on the bases of new criteria. It proposes to examine sexist of gender assumptions on the part of the writer and expose the mysogyny, if any, behind such distorted or stereotyped representations of women.

This kind of de-construction and re-valuation has gone into the creative writings of some of the Indian women writers of short stories and novels in English, as for example, in Shashi Deshpande’s mythological stories in *The Stone Women*.

Feminist criticism, however, is a new phenomenon. If we leave aside the names of Gayatri Spivak and a couple of others, we have no great champions of the cause. But among creative writers of short stories and novels – we have quite a few. Indian ‘Feminism’ may not have been strong on theory, but protest voices, especially by women writers, are certainly heard and command respectable attention. The accents in which these writers speak are certainly overt, loud and unambiguous.

Of the six selected Indian women writers of short stories in English, Shashi Deshpande’s is the most subdued
voice of protest. Her protagonists do not like to overstep the boundaries of tradition, whatever their problem. They seek to resolve matters relating to marital dishord and marginality of status within the framework of traditional values and familial intactness and well-beings, and that in the interest of their daughters' future also. Only Deshpande's latest *The Stone Women* reveals the lacerated feelings and sense of irreparable wrong that her mythological characters - Sita, Draupadi and Kunti - have suffered, and suffered silently. It is only here through their outpourings of long-suppressed feelings of hurt and martyrdom (at the altar of masculine righteousness) that they are given a liberated voice. But their lives are over and done with. They cannot come back to life and their human rights restored. But there are millions among contemporary women who suffer like them, who are faced with problems of loss of identity, slavish dependence and marginalisation. So justice can be done and balance restored retrospectively and vicariously - that is the message of Deshpande's short stories. But these resurrected portraits do not, however, articulate a radical feminist philosophy, nor can the Sitas and Ambas and Kuntis of old mythology become role models for the thousands of similarly-situated helpless Indian women.
In terms of exposure to new life-situations and the different worlds of experience the women writers have gone through or observed, and in terms of the open-endedness of the solutions they think of, Shashi Deshpande cannot be placed on the same pedestal as the others, Viz., Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni and Jhumpa Lahiri. (These last three have been nicknamed the Bengal tigresses)

Settled abroad these last three approach the issue from the vantage point of a double angle - the feminine sensibility angle as well as the immigrant’s sensibility. Some of the stories of Divakaruni and Lahiri are located in native soil, and of the two Lahiri feels the pull of the native land i.e. India (She was born in London and brought up in Rhove Island, though) even more than Divakaruni who migrated to America at the age of 19.

Shashi Deshpande lacked the experience which the either three were privileged to have. So her protagonists are not faced with an open-ended choice between a life of independece and an assertion of identity on the one hand and a life of adjustment, of a re-beginning and finding solution to marital discord within the precincts of respectability. They
are afraid to cross the Lakshmanrekha and venture out on their own.

Of the three Bengalis, belonging as they do originally to a state where local nationalist pride in Bengali culture and tradition is very vigilant, present a different face of feminism in their writings.

Of them only Lahiri shows a particular learning and fascination for the native way of living and tradition. Even in present day Bengal, as Nabaneeta Dev Sen observes, a woman-writer is supposed to have stepped out of her area of the senses and heart and to have appropriated a male gestutre (belonging to the area of the mind).

But as Virginia Woolf in her ‘Women and Fiction’ in Women and Writing 1979, rightly defined, the writer’s sensibility is neither masculine nor feminine, but androgynous. She further observed that writing in a language other than the vernacular brings complete freedom to the woman writer. This complete freedom is patently visible in the works of those Bengali tigresses. Of these only Lahiri, surprisingly for one who was born and brought up abroad, looks back, in nostalgia, at the country of her ancestors. As for the immigrant experience as a factor in restoring marital
discord, we can discern different shades of the immigrant experience in them. Bharati Mukherjee's protagonists belong to a mixed category. They are migrants not only from India, but also from countries like Trinidad, Vietnam and the Philippines. Since Mukherjee had moved down from Canada to America and her observation covered a wider range of immigrant experience. She brought a multi-cultural viewpoint to bear upon the issues which migrants faced in an alien country. The new world held out the hope of a new beginning for those who wanted to break out of the rigid mould of native culture and ethos, because their marital relationship had gone sour or because one was widowed, and a widow-back in India would have no life. The concerns of both Mukherjee and Divakaruni happen be the same and the solutions they hold out to these who face a choice between a return to India and permanent settlement abroad, are more or less similar. Their protagonists opt for the liberated outlook and culture of the alien land. Of the two, only Bharati Mukherjee seems to favor a "Live-in" option in place of an entrapment into marriage again. In the case of Lahiri's protagonists, tangled marital relationships are eventually straightened out within the framework of family values. Mukherjee's protagonists have come to distrust the
permanence of man-woman relationships. They want to escape into total freedom, they want to become free birds. For them freedom doesn't mean that they wish to remain single or unmarried. They do not desire to be detached from society. The protagonists of the stories of these women writers declare that they need a life-partner who is companionable, compatible and congenial.
References:


